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Approaches for addressing complexity in programme theory

Experiences in applying the Actor-based Change (ABC) Framework to a variety of international development programmes and evaluations

Andrew Koleros and Mark Oldenbeuving – Palladium

UK Evaluation Society 2018 Annual Evaluation Conference

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Actor-based Change Framework

Introduction

Despite a wide body of literature on the importance of programme theory and the need to tackle complexity to improve international development programming, the use of programme theory to underpin interventions aimed at facilitating change in complex systems remains a challenge to many programme practitioners and evaluators. The Actor-based Change (ABC) Framework offers a pragmatic approach to address these challenges, integrating concepts and frameworks drawn from complexity science and behavioral change literature to develop robust programme theory for complex interventions.

This brief is an extended version of a presentation given by Andrew Koleros and Mark Oldenbeuving at the UK Evaluation Society (UKES) 2018 Annual Evaluation Conference on 3rd May 2018 in London. The brief presents the conceptual framework for the approach and describes how it has been applied in practice on an evaluation of a security and justice programme in Nepal and an adaptive accountability programme in Pakistan.

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> *"The development and joint discussion of an Actor-based Theory of Change has helped collective understanding of IPSSJ's complexity and in identifying gaps."*
>
> IP-SSJ 2016 DFID Annual Review

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Actor-based Change Framework

Uses of programme theory in international development programs

With declining foreign aid budgets and growing calls for accountability, the 'results agenda' has led to a rethink in how to improve international development programming and a proliferation of approaches to support these efforts. Among these, there is broad agreement on the usefulness of developing a theory of change which articulates the series of steps in the change process that leads from the programme intervention to impact, and the assumptions underpinning this logic (Stein and Valters, 2012). Among a number of different terms being used to describe this process, we have adopted the term **programme theory** as defined by Funnell and Rogers in Purposeful Program Theory (Funnell and Rogers, 2011).

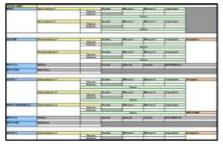
Regardless of the name used, from its origins in the field of evaluation programme theory has now come to be used across different purposes: programme design and planning, monitoring and accountability, and evaluation and learning (Patton, 2008). This evolution in the uses of programme theory for these multiple purposes often detracts from its original purpose - an effective theoretical model for articulating how change happens - and limits its usefulness for developing programme theory for complex situations.

What is programme theory?

- A set of assumptions about how an intervention achieves its intended results and under what conditions.
- An explicit identification of the implicit connection between activities and outcomes
- Helps to articulate our understanding of how and why change happens
- A way of attempting to be more honest about complex change processes
- Assists in understanding program attribution vs. contribution

Uses of programme theory in international development programmes

Origins in **programme evaluation**



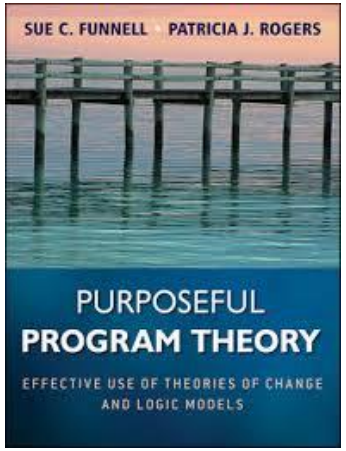
Monitoring tool for accountability and performance

Fit for purpose in the **age of complexity?** ?

Usefulness to support **program design**

Used by programs as a **communication tool**

Clarity in terms: how we use the terms programme theory, theory of change and theory of action.



Programme Theory

An explicit theory or model of how an intervention contributes to a set of specific outcomes through a series of intermediate results. Programme Theory explains how the programme's activities contribute to the results.

Theory of Change

Central mechanism by which change comes about for individuals, groups and communities.

Theory of Action

Explains how programs or other interventions are constructed to activate their theory of change. Explains the activities that will be undertaken and what level of success will be needed for each outcome to produce the final intended results.

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Actor-based Change Framework

Complex systems

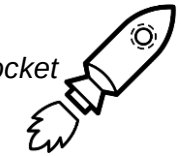
Just as the use of programme theory has evolved over time, so too has the development community's theoretical understanding of how change happens. This shift is driven by a growing recognition of the complexity of the change processes within complex adaptive systems, advocated by organisations such as the Santa Fe Institute. The growing literature on complexity includes diverse definitions and conceptualizations of complexity and complex problems in the context of development intervention.

The three-part classification of what is 'simple', 'complicated' and 'complex' provides a useful framework for identifying how best to depict programme theory to fit the complexity of the situation. Though a number of useful logic models exist for simple and complicated situations, the development of programme theory for interventions in complex international development programmes still remains a challenge for many programme theorists and evaluators.

Program theory in the age of complexity?

Following a recipe

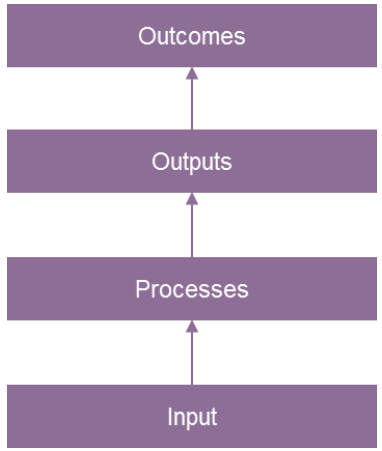
Sending a rocket to the moon



Raising a child

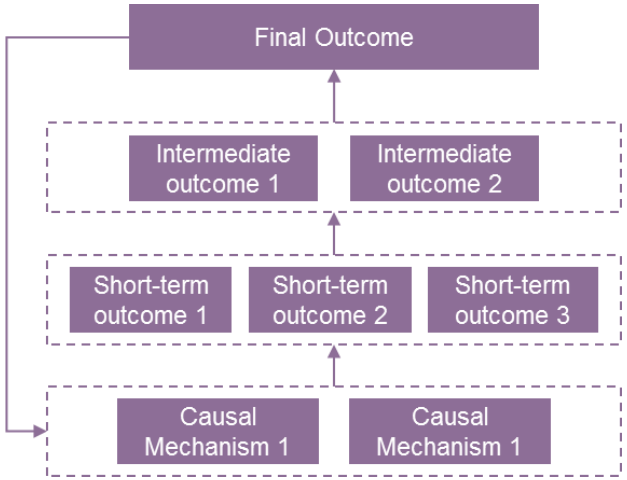
Simple

Domain of the known



Complicated

Domain of the unknown *but knowable*



Complex

Domain of the unknowable

Definition of complexity

- How individual actors within a system develop complex structures without central command
- System changes through changes in the interactions and behaviours of the individual actors
- Cannot be predicted in advance and might lead to a different result if repeated

Properties of complex systems

- Individual actors who exhibit:
  - No central control
  - Nonlinear interactions
- Emergent behaviours
  - Evolution and learning
- Whole is greater than the sum of its parts
- Can't be individually understood by components

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Actor-based Change Framework

The Actor-based Change (ABC) Framework provides a pragmatic approach to articulating programme theory for complex interventions.
It applies concepts and frameworks drawn from the literature around complexity science to develop programme theory for interventions aimed at facilitating change in complex systems. It entails three key components:

Actor-based Systems Map

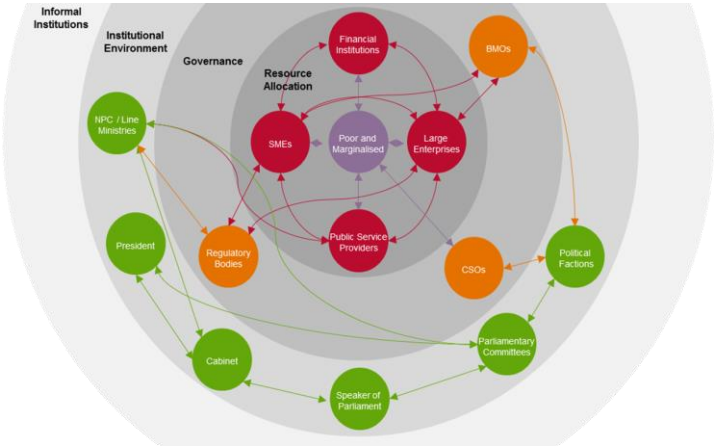
Describes system dynamics in terms of the development problem to be addressed, the relevant actor groups associated with the problem, and the behavioral conditions that define their practices and relationships.

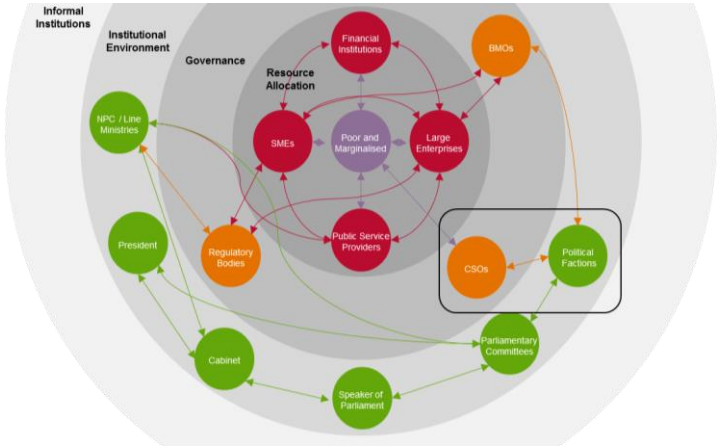
Change Agenda

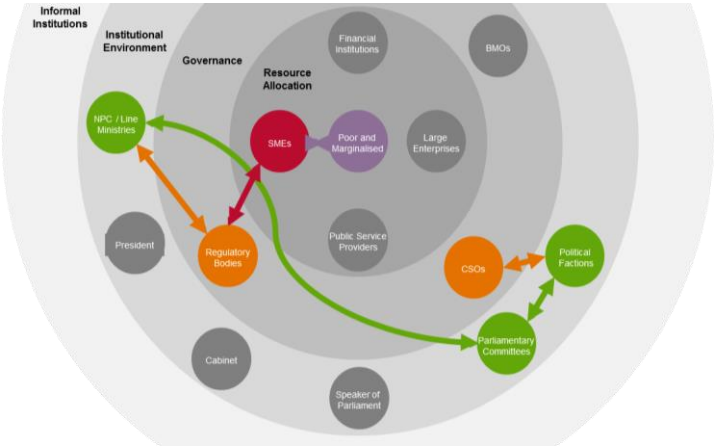
Identifies which conditions would need to shift over time to lead to sustainable changes in practices and relationships that would likely address the development problem in a sustainable manner.

Causal Impact Pathways

Describes expected pathways by which interventions lead to actor-level changes (Theories of Action) and possible flexible pathways by which these lead to systems change (Theory of Change).







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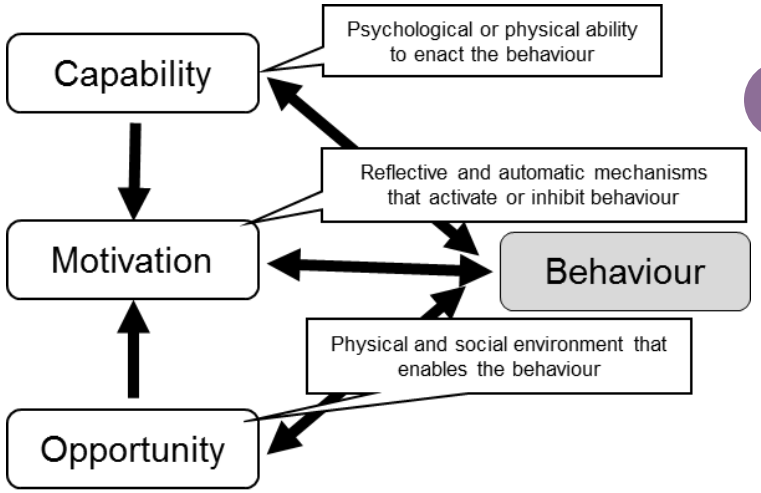
Actor-based Change Framework

Actor-based Systems Map

The systems map depicts the current practices and relationships among actors in the system (‘the problem’), the behavioral determinants of these current practices and relationships (‘causes of the problem’) and the outcome at the macro level that results from the interactions and adaptations of the actors within the system (‘consequences of the problem’).

1 The Problem

First all actors involved in the problem, its causes and consequences are identified. This limits the number of actors included in the systems map to a manageable number.

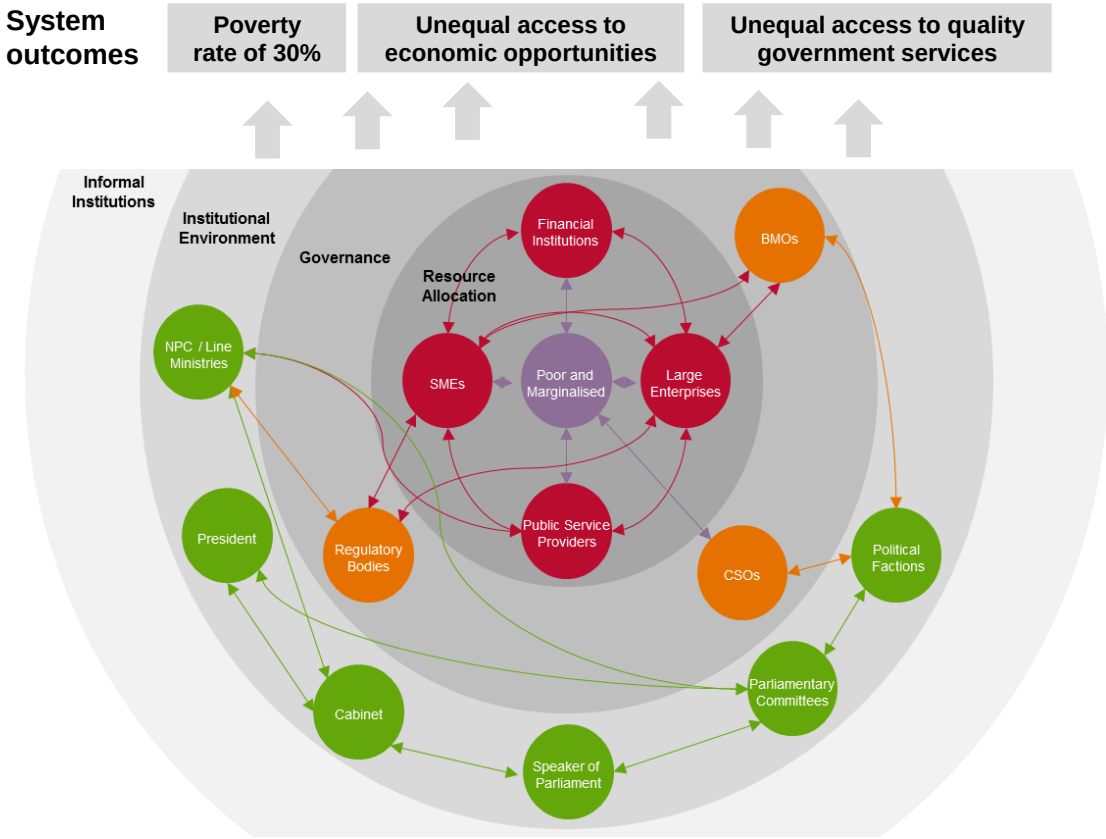


2 Causes of the problem

For each actor identified in the system, the current behaviours are broken down to the combinations of behavioural conditions driving the practice using the COM-B approach described by Michie et al. in 2011.

3 Consequences of the problem

The ‘development problem’ to be addressed is then understood as the outcome resulting from the current interaction of the actors within the system.



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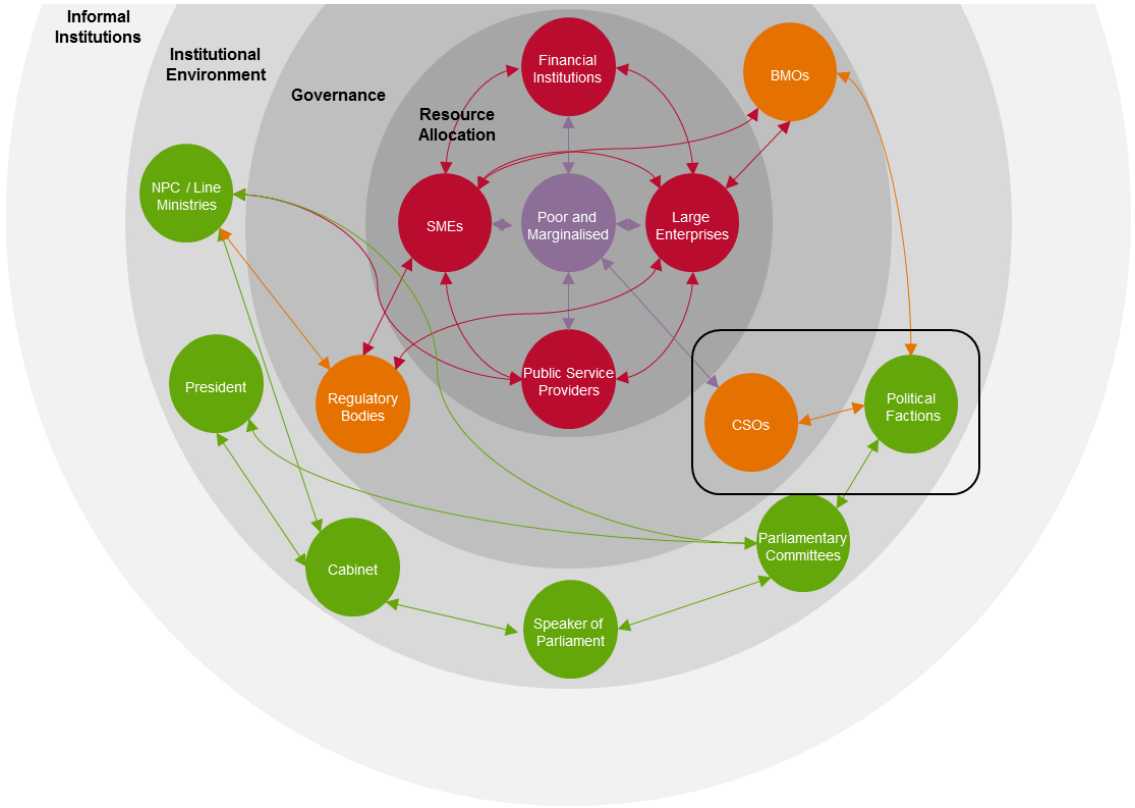
Actor-based Change Framework

Change Agenda

The Change Agenda identifies the shift from a ‘current state’ to a desired ‘future state’, among and between actors in the system. It identifies how conditions would need to shift over time in order to drive sustainable change among each actor group and within the system as a whole. The change agenda also takes into account the fact that actors influence each other: a change in one actor’s practice will inevitably affect the practices and relationships of other actors in the system.

Systems map as a tool to identify entry points



Change agenda for one actor within the system

CURRENT STATE	Actor Group	FUTURE STATE
Current behaviors and practices	**CHANGE IN BEHAVIOUR**	**Future behaviors and practices**
• Current knowledge, skills, understanding, awareness, etc.	**CAPABILITY**	• Future knowledge, skills, understanding, awareness, etc.
• Current physical and social opportunities	**OPPORTUNITY**	• Future physical and social opportunities
• Current attitudes, beliefs, incentives, etc.	**MOTIVATION**	• Future attitudes, beliefs, incentives, etc.

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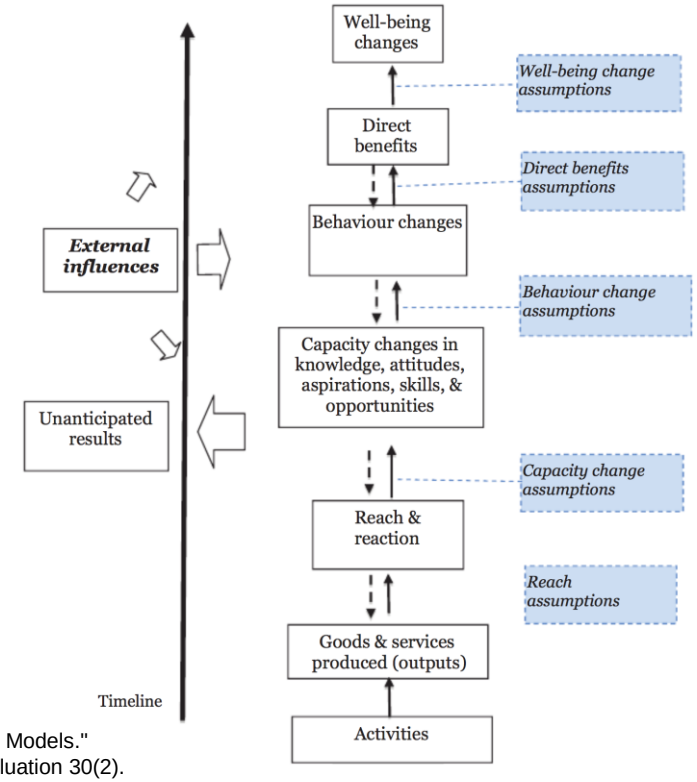
Actor-based Change Framework

Causal Impact Pathways

Program theory is then depicted by articulating causal impact pathways which posit the expected pathways from intervention to actor-level change (Theory of Action), and the possible pathways to system-level changes and emergent outcomes brought about by actor-level changes (Theory of Change). It positions changes in the conditions outlined in the change agenda as the central mechanisms by which change happens for each actor group and/or relationship in the systems map. Program activities are the interventions designed to activate these mechanisms. By including the assumptions in each causal impact pathway they are at the centre of results measurement, program learning and reflective activities. These are thus not static, program logic models; but rather flexible and iterative models, adapted and responsive to changing contexts and emerging situations.

Theory of Action

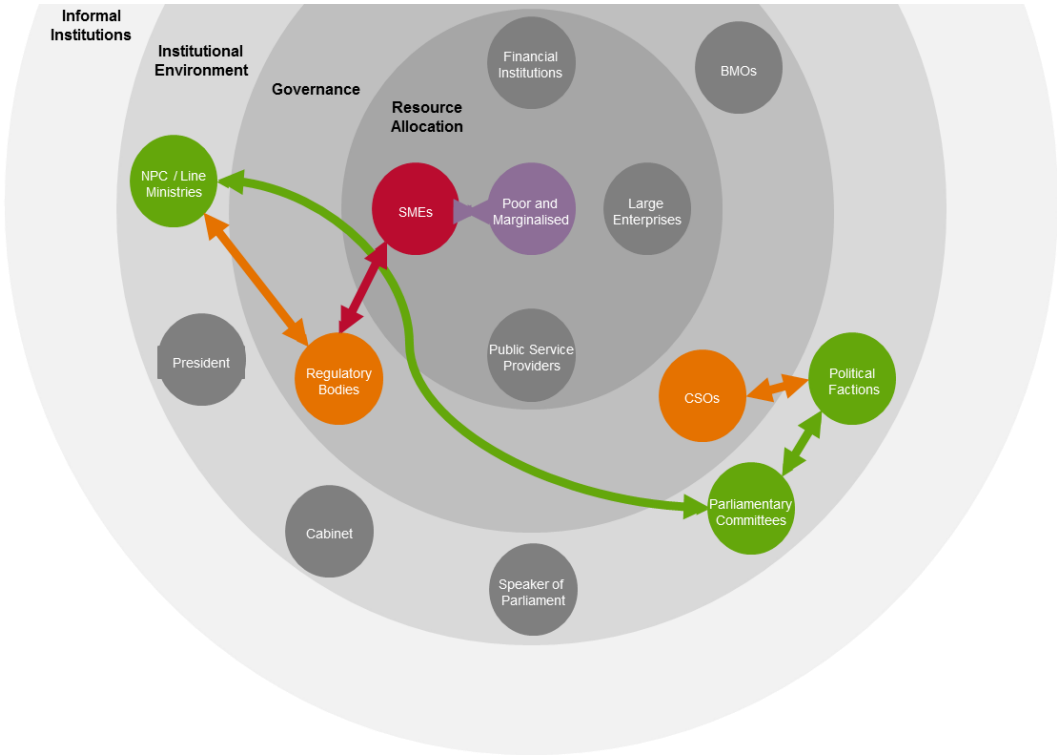
- The Theory of Action describes the expected pathways from interventions to changes in practice.



Mayne, J. (2015). "Useful Theory of Change Models." Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation 30(2).

Theory of Change

- The Theory of Change depicts a number of possible pathways leading from actor-level change to systems change and emergent outcomes:



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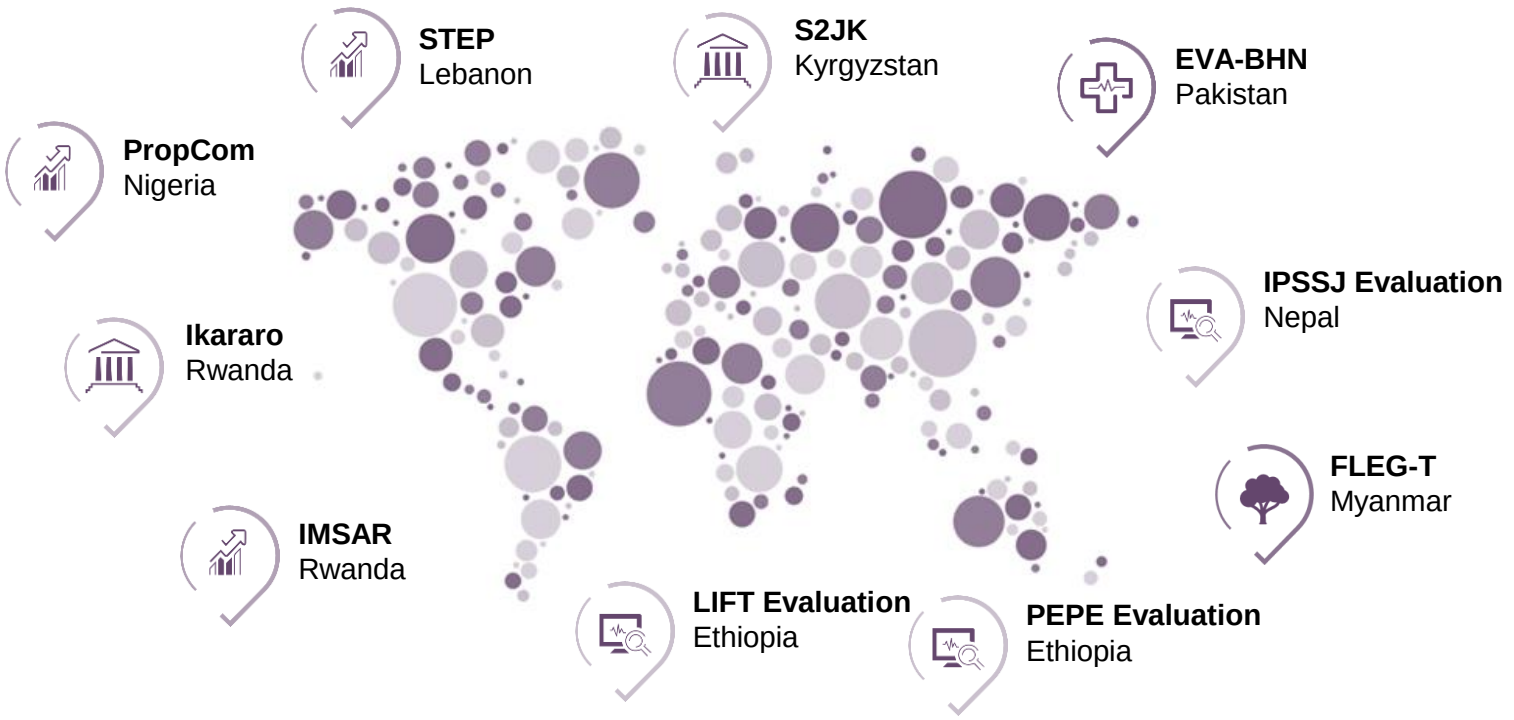
Actor-based Change Framework

Implementation Experience

Palladium has implemented different aspects of the ABC Framework on several main programs and evaluations in the development of this approach over the past few years. We have now codified this experience as an integrated approach. In our experience, the ABC Framework offers a number of advantages over current approaches to developing program theory.

This section presents two case studies of actual use of the ABC Framework in practice: first, on an evaluation of a complex security and justice program in Nepal, and, second, for establishing the monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) system of an adaptive voice and accountability program in Pakistan.

Palladium has implemented aspects of the ABC Framework across regions and sectors



Advantages

- Captures complexity while strengthening causal logic
- Framework can be applied at any point in a program process
- Encourages local participation in program theory design processes
- Methodologically pluralistic

Challenges

- Requires upfront investment in time and staff resources
- Requires skilled facilitation with multiple stakeholders
- Data-intensive nature might overburden M&E system

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Actor-based Change Framework

Case Study - Pakistan Empowerment, Voice and Accountability for Better Health and Nutrition (EVA-BHN) program

Funding: UK Department for International Development (DFID) **Timeline:** 2014 to 2019

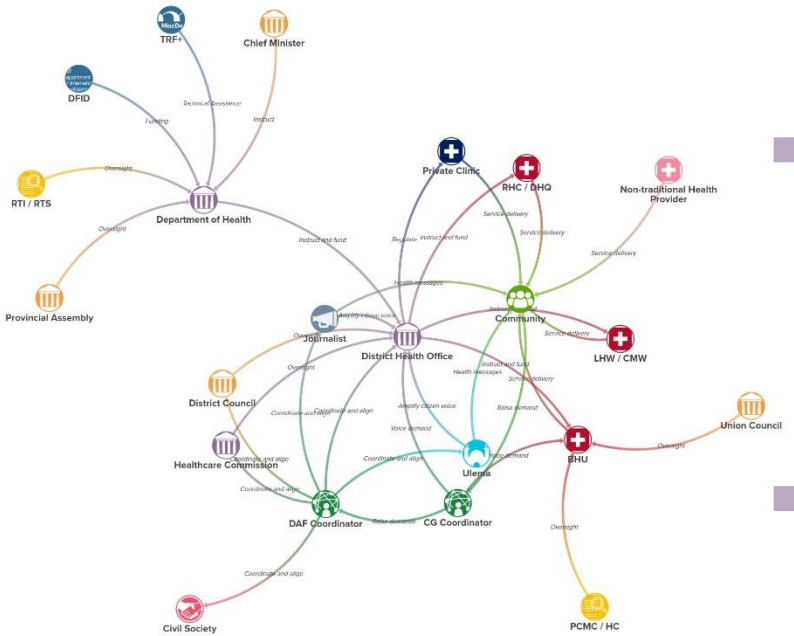
Program goal: To empower, organize and facilitate citizens to hold the governments of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to account for the delivery of quality RMNCH services

Program implementation: Multiple components, including empowering community groups to raise their voice, establishing advocacy platforms at district and provincial level, conducting community based monitoring of health facilities, training health journalists, and engaging with religious scholars.

Use of ABC Framework: The ABC Framework was used to develop a program theory capable of taking into account the complex governance structures of Pakistan, the numerous actors that EVA-BHN interventions aim to reach, and the complex change processes that the program aims to realize.

Actor-based Systems Map

Through a series of workshops and meetings with implementation teams, the development problem was identified, including the relevant actors associated with this development problem, along with associated current behaviours. The workshops were informed both by the already ongoing implementation, as well as by findings from political economy analyses conducted by the programme.



Development Problem

Public health system does not provide sufficient and quality reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health (RMNCH) services.

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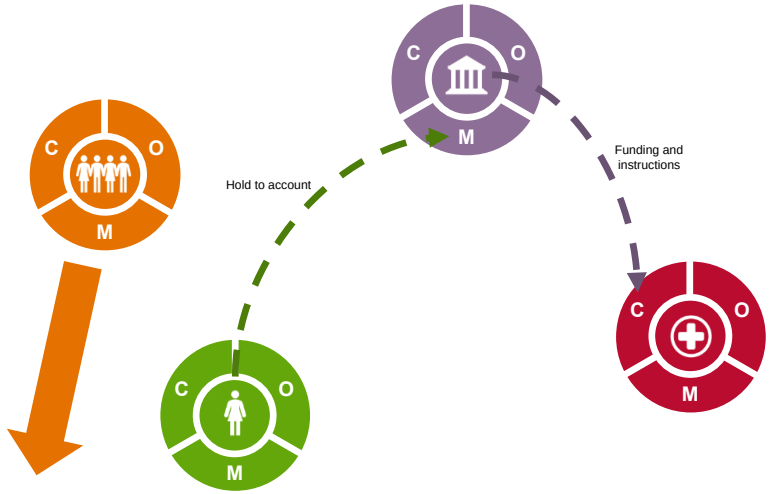
Actor-based Change Framework

Case Study - Pakistan Empowerment, Voice and Accountability for Better Health and Nutrition (EVA-BHN) program

Change Agenda

The team subsequently developed the change agendas for the actors in the system map, to define the current behaviour as a basis for visioning the future behaviour, and what behavioural conditions need to shift over time to achieve this. The change agenda also takes into account the fact that actors influence each other: a change in one actor's practice will inevitably affect the practices and relationships of other actors in the system.

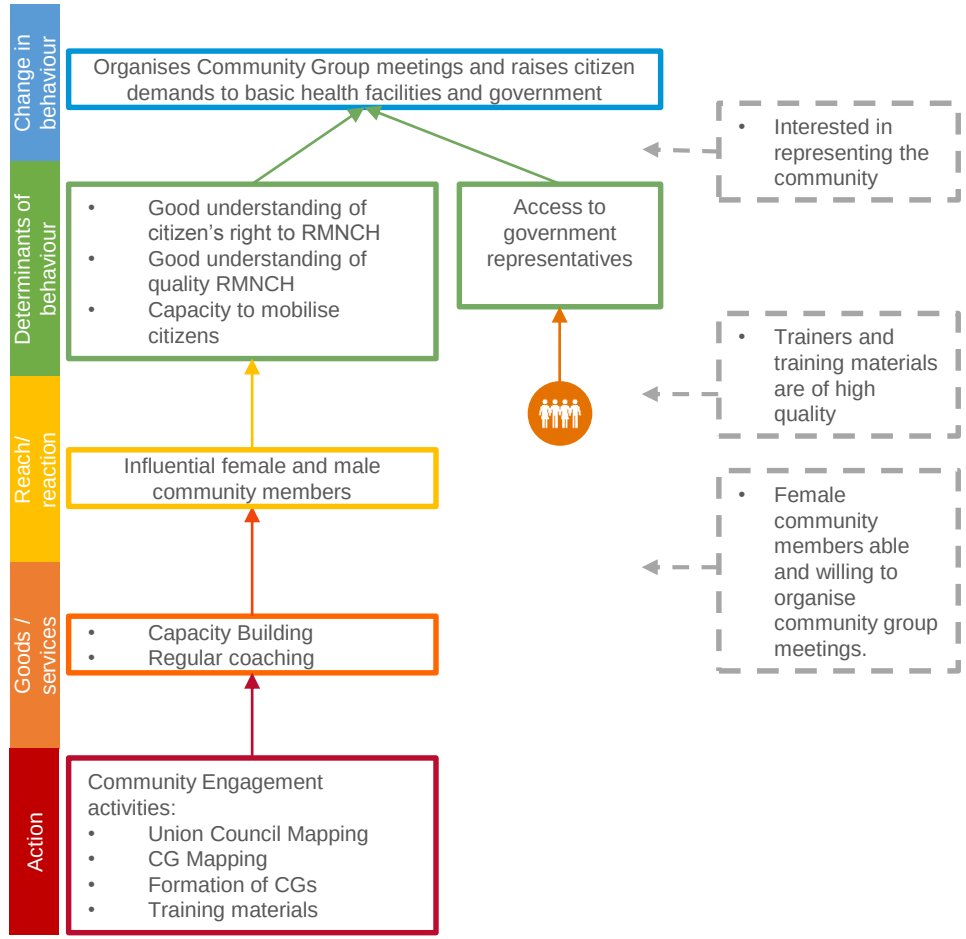


Community Leaders

CURRENT STATE	CHANGE IN BEHAVIOUR	FUTURE STATE
Not active in improving health services		**Organises meetings and raise citizen demands government**
• Limited understanding of citizen's right to RMNCH and nutrition services • Limited understanding of what quality RMNCH and nutrition services look like • Limited capacity to mobilise citizens	**CAPABILITY** *Psychological or physical ability to enact change*	• Good understanding of citizen's right to RMNCH and nutrition services • Good understanding of what quality RMNCH and nutrition services look like • Capacity to mobilise citizens
• Limited access to government representatives	**OPPORTUNITY** *Physical and social environment that enables change*	• Access to government representatives
• Interested in representing the community	**MOTIVATION** *Reflective and automatic mechanisms that influence change*	• Interested in representing the community

Causal Impact Pathways – Theories of Action

The Theory of Action for each actor group was developed to describe the expected pathway from intervention to changes in behaviour for each actor, as well as the causal link assumptions at each step of the pathway.



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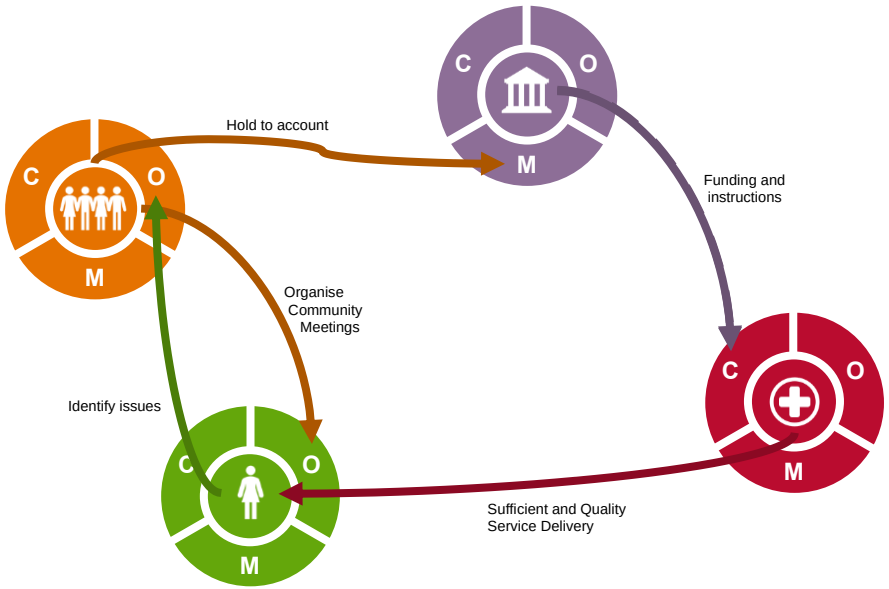
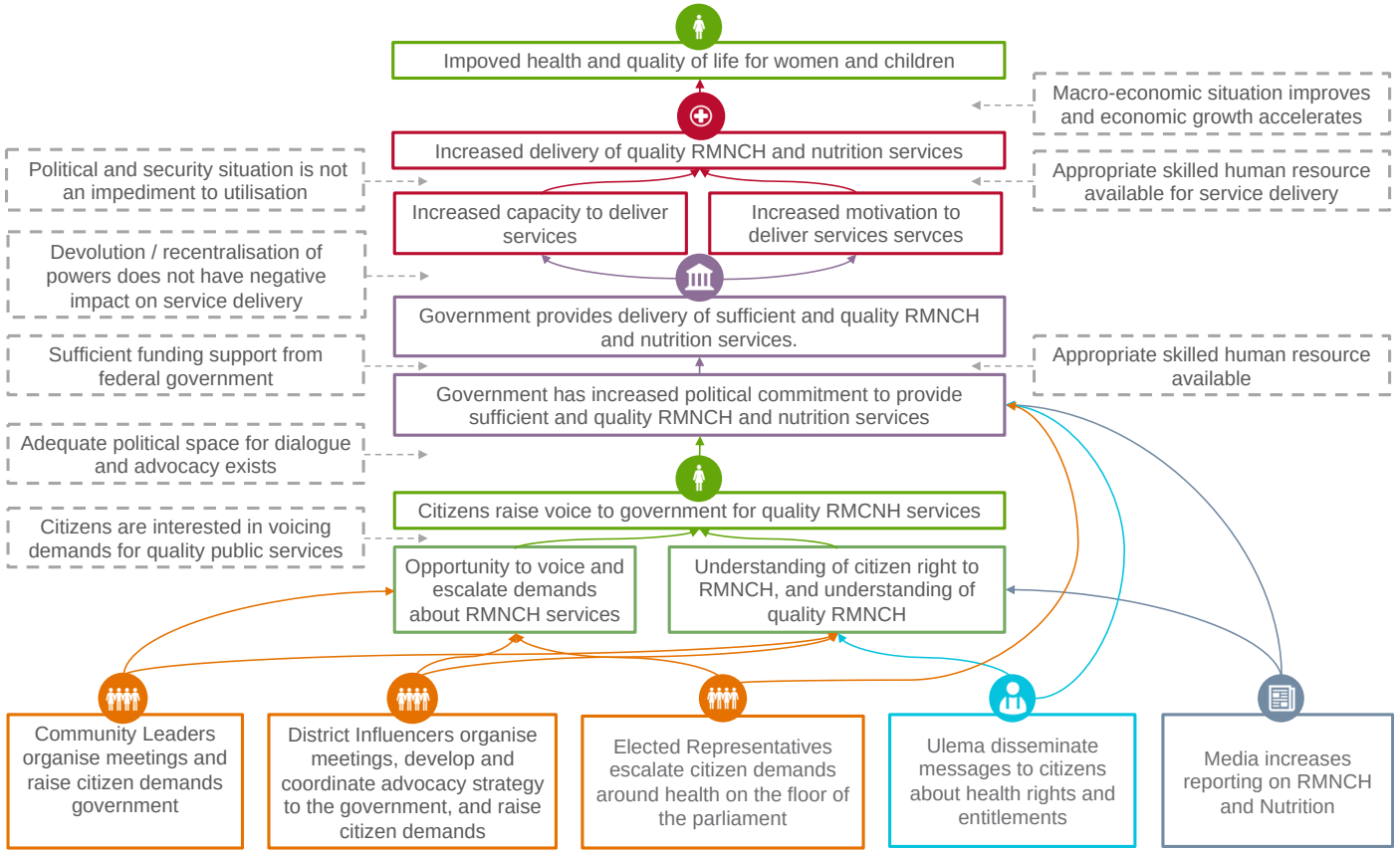
Actor-based Change Framework

Case Study - Pakistan Empowerment, Voice and Accountability for Better Health and Nutrition (EVA-BHN) program

Causal Impact Pathways – Theory of Change

The Theory of Change was developed to combine all Theories of Action, and to show how this would lead to systemic change at the beneficiary level. This can be depicted by showing the possible actor-based changes on the actor-based system map (below), or by using a more conventional logic model format (right)





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More information on the Reality Check Approach can be found here: www.reality-check-approach.com

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THANK YOU

For more information on this approach, please contact:

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